

2005 White House Conference on Aging

White Paper Presented by the National Safety Council

Falls Among Older Adults: A National Problem

The Extent of Need

For most of our lives, we can substantially reduce our greatest risks of injury and death. Every year, unintentional injuries kill more than 101,000 individuals, with a cost to society of \$608 billion. Of all the risks, falls are the leading cause of unintentional death among people 65 and older, approaching 11,000 deaths a year. Falls are the third leading cause of death for all ages, totaling 18,822 last year. There were 1.8 million emergency room visits and more than 420,000 hospital admissions of adults 65 years old and older as a result of falls according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). An estimated one in three adults 65 years old and older experience a fall each year. Hip fractures, primarily the result of falls, account for some 300,000 hospitalizations each year and the direct care costs of osteoporotic fractures are some \$18 billion each year. About 20 percent of people who suffer a hip fracture will need nursing home care within a year, and 20 percent will die within a year of suffering the fracture. Nearly half of those who survive a hip fracture never regain full mobility, nor their former quality of life.

The 2005 White House Conference on Aging

The *2005 White House Conference on Aging* agenda defines the scope of the compelling private and public sector challenge of aging. The national problem of falls among older adults impacts health & long term living, healthy lifestyles, prevention and education for lifestyle modifications, and mental health. It also impacts civic and social engagement to raise public awareness of the problem, and to promote effective adaptation to the conditions of aging to include the need for increased physical activity among the elderly, and improved quality of life by avoiding the loss of autonomy or death, resulting from a falls injury. This national problem can be addressed with common-sense solutions and actions built upon successful models of injury prevention such as educational campaigns, research, voluntary actions by corporations, public and private partners, and individuals—and when appropriate, through legislation.

The National Safety Council

The National Safety Council (NSC), founded in 1913 and chartered by Congress in 1953, is the nation's leading advocate for safety and health. The Council, its chapters, 47,000 member organizations, volunteers, and partners believe that most unintentional injuries are preventable. The Council joins the *2005 White House Conference on Aging* to address the issues of aging, and particularly the unacceptable tide of falls injuries for older adults that are attributable to the leading cause of death for this age group.

Addressing the Problem

Legislative Action: The *Keeping Seniors Safe from Falls Act of 2005* (S. 1531), was introduced by Senators Michael Enzi (R-WY) and Barbara Mikulski (D-MD). The bill passed the Senate last year by Unanimous Consent, and it is believed that it will again be overwhelmingly supported in the Senate again this Congress. The main components of the legislation fund a national and state educational outreach program, demonstration projects, and research. The United States House of Representatives also introduced the bill last Congress and will again introduce the legislation in the near future. The National Safety Council is the key organization behind the bill and will continue to work to ensure its success and passage by Congress.

Cooperative Agreement: CDC Healthy Aging - Prevention of Falls of the Elderly: For several years, NSC's Safety and Health Policy Center has worked on a falls prevention project as part of a Healthy Aging Cooperative Agreement funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). NSC has developed educational materials based on information obtained through focus groups with older adults. NSC has presented at a number of conferences around the country. Through this funding initiative, NSC provided mini-grants to 19 chapters for local falls prevention activities. The chapters chose to undertake various activities based on community needs and their resources. Activities included such things as conducting presentations at senior centers and other facilities serving seniors, and disseminating educational materials.

Partnership Agreement: NSC also worked with the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) on nationwide falls prevention outreach activities. The activities followed the release of a report from CPSC highlighting the extent of the problem of falls among older adults (*Special Report: Emergency Room Injuries, Adults 65 and Older*, www.cpsc.gov/library/foia/foia05/os/older.pdf).

Website Outreach: NSC has also included fall prevention information on its website along with a downloadable fall prevention poster, www.nsc.org/library.htm and click on the [Falls](#) link.

What We Can Do to Prevent Falls

For older adults, falls and the resulting injuries can diminish the ability to lead active, independent lives. Falls are caused by a number of things. Changes in vision, hearing, strength, and coordination can increase a person's risk. Older adults are most at risk falling, and women are at greater risk than men. People can reduce their chances of falling by making small adjustments in the home and lifestyle, such as:

- Leading an active lifestyle. Physical activity is one of the most important ways to reduce the chances of falling. It makes people stronger and decreases the chances of falling.

- Making home safer (e.g., removing things that can be tripped over, removing throw rugs, installing grab bars and handrails, using non-slip mats in the bathtub/shower, using a night light). About half of all falls happen at home.
- Having a health care provider review medicines. Some medicines, or combinations of medicines, can make a person drowsy or light-headed, which can lead to a fall.
- Having vision checked. Good vision can decrease the chances of falling.
- Wearing appropriate footwear.

Some examples of the activities the NSC Chapters undertook with the mini-grant funds that can be replicated nationally include:

- Expanding an existing falls prevention program to include newspaper PSAs, fall prevention posters, and participation in senior wellness fairs.
- Conducting interactive presentations for groups of seniors at different Council on Aging Nutrition Sites across a state.
- Entering into partnerships with a hospital and a retail facility to distribute falls prevention educational materials.
- Providing information to seniors through a partnership with a non-profit organization serving seniors and their families.
- Developing an information kit that provides all the resources a person would need to make a presentation on falls prevention including a PowerPoint presentation and script (http://www.safety-council.com/_ppts/Alive_at_90.ppt). The kit was widely promoted locally and made available to other Council chapters across the country.
- Training/raising awareness of health care professionals who work with seniors (therapists, nurses, senior center staff, etc.).

In Summary

Falls are the leading cause of death for older adults. Almost 11,000 older adults a year, or 30 each day, die from a falls injury. Half of those who survive a fall never return to their prior level of mobility or independence. Addressing this national problem will positively impact the significant issues of aging. A great deal of research has been conducted on injury prevention by federal agencies and private-sector organizations, but more research is needed. There is also a widely held belief that “accidents just happen.” This belief is prevalent among the general public and many policy-makers. The National Safety Council knows that injuries do not just happen. They are caused, and they are preventable. The National Safety Council seeks to continue its national agenda on the issue of falls prevention, and asks that the issue of falls prevention become an issue of federal policy. For further information, please contact the National Safety Council, Bobby J. Jackson, Senior Vice President, at 1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW – Suite 1200, Washington, DC 20036, 202-293-2270, jacksonb@nsc.org.